Japan PM ignored Washington to visit shrine, U.S. official says

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WASHINGTON – Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Yasukuni Shrine on Thursday after the United States urged him not to do so, prompting Washington to use harsher than normal language in criticizing him, a U.S. official said.
Another U.S. official blasted Abe for visiting the controversial shrine, which honors war criminals among Japan's war dead, saying he rendered recent U.S. efforts to help Japan mend its fences with China and South Korea "useless."

The Obama administration repeatedly asked Abe through informal channels not to visit the Tokyo shrine, knowing it would draw strong reactions from Beijing and Seoul, and worrying it would develop into a major international problem, the first U.S. official said.

There had been rumors circulating since earlier this year that Abe would visit Yasukuni before the end of December.

Countries such as China and South Korea that suffered under Japan before and during World War II have asked Japanese leaders to refrain from visiting the Shinto shrine.

Washington was informed of Abe's plan to go to Yasukuni about an hour ahead of time through the embassy in Tokyo, the first U.S. official said.

The U.S. government issued a statement from the embassy soon after the visit saying that "the United States is disappointed that Japan's leadership has taken an action that will exacerbate tensions with Japan's neighbors."

The U.S. first considered expressing "regret" or "concern" in the statement, but the stronger language was chosen through prior consultation between the White House and the State Department, the official said.

The second U.S. official said the visit will have a "negative impact" on relations between the United States and Japan, especially after Vice President Joe Biden visited Tokyo, Beijing and Seoul earlier this month.

Biden met Abe, Chinese President Xi Jinping and South Korean President Park Geun-hye and urged each one to make efforts to enhance dialogue and improve relations.

“The (Yasukuni) visit made it useless,” the official said, referring to Biden’s efforts, as well as the efforts by others in the U.S. government to ease tensions in the region.

Relations between Japan and China, and Japan and South Korea, have been strained due to the long-running territorial disputes and interpretation of regional history before and during the war.

Abe is now the first prime minister to visit Yasukuni since Junichiro Koizumi, who did so every year during his tenure from 2001 to 2006.

Each visit hurt relations between Japan and China and South Korea, a White House official said.

Abe said he visited the shrine to renew his resolve to make sure Japan will not engage in war again and create a world free of war.